

# Business Immigration

The first few months of 2026 and the road ahead

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In our last update in December 2025, we reflected on what was described as, Brexit aside, the "biggest overhaul of the legal migration model in 50 years". That update covered the major reforms to sponsorship costs, visa eligibility and routes to permanent settlement.

Since then, the pace of change has not slowed. The first few months of 2026 have brought a significant Statement of Changes to the Immigration Rules and growing clarity - though not yet certainty - around the timeline for the Government's earned settlement proposals. At the same time, new obligations on sponsors around employment law rights, payroll compliance and right to work checks for contingent workers have come into force.

This update focuses on what has changed in the first few months of 2026, and what is still expected to come for the remainder of the year and into 2027.

## Statement of Changes to Immigration Rules

The UK Government's new '[Statement of Changes to Immigration Rules](#)' (the "**Statement**") was published on 5 March 2026. The changes introduced by the Statement take effect in stages from March 2026 until March 2027 and form part of the government's distinctive tightening of the immigration framework.

For employers, the key timeline is as follows:

- **26 March 2026:** A "visa brake" was introduced on student visa applications (excluding child student visas) for nationals of Afghanistan, Cameroon, Myanmar and Sudan, and on skilled worker visa applications for Afghan nationals, meaning that entry clearance applications in the relevant categories will be refused.
- **7 April 2026:** Sponsored workers must now be paid at least the minimum salary in each pay period rather than across an annual total (for decisions made on or after 8 April 2026).
- **8 April 2026:** Businesses can now sponsor Global Business Mobility - Secondment Workers after just six months (rather than the previous twelve) of qualifying overseas employment.
- **8 April 2026:** The Ukraine Permission Extension has been extended to allow eligible individuals to obtain a further extension of 24 months.
- **26 March 2027:** The English language requirement for settlement applications will increase from B1 to B2, but only for applications submitted from 26 March 2027.

In addition to the Statement of Changes, the Home Office updated its [sponsor guidance](#) on 6 March 2026 to tighten compliance expectations. For employers, the most notable changes are:

- Sponsors must provide sponsored workers with information on their UK employment law rights and have records evidencing this (for example, employment contracts, employee handbooks or training records).
- Sponsors must stay up to date with the sponsor guidance. Given the length of the guidance, this is a particularly onerous requirement for HR teams.
- Right to work checks on sponsored workers apply regardless of whether or not the sponsored worker is a direct employee of the sponsor. This means contingent workers such as consultants and temporary agency staff are caught by this check.

To adapt to these developments, sponsors should audit payroll practices to ensure salaries meet the required threshold in each pay period, review the status of any workers affected by the visa brake, extend right to work checks to cover contingent workers and update onboarding processes to evidence compliance with the new obligation to inform sponsored workers of their employment law rights.



## Earned Settlement

As mentioned in our last edition, the UK Government's [consultation](#) on 'Earned Settlement' closed on 12 February 2026 and we are awaiting the Government's response to its proposals. These proposals were originally outlined in the Government's white paper, '[Restoring Control over the Immigration System](#)', published in May 2025.

The Home Secretary has confirmed in an interview with the Times that the Government's plans to double the standard qualifying period for Indefinite Leave to Remain ("ILR") from 5 years to 10 years will be implemented. However, this change will come into force in Autumn 2026, rather than April 2026. In a [speech](#) at the Institute for Public Policy Research, the Home Secretary strongly indicated that these changes will be applied retrospectively. From an employer perspective, this means sponsors are likely to have more time to apply for settlement before the changes are brought into force.

On 13 March 2026, the Home Affairs Committee published a [report](#) criticising the lack of a clear timeline around the reforms. The Committee recommended that the Home Office should take time to get the implementation period correct rather than rushing through changes. The Government must respond to the Committee by 13 May 2026.

## Timeline

Aside from the changes to sponsor guidance noted above, the following major changes can be anticipated in the remainder of 2026 and for 2027:

- **Autumn 2026:** The "earned settlement" reforms are expected to take effect, with ILR qualifying periods significantly increasing.
- **1 January 2027:** New Graduate Visas will last only 18 months (or 36 months with a PhD), giving graduates less time to find more long term sponsored work after they finish their studies.
- **26 March 2027:** The English language requirement for settlement applications will increase from B1 to B2. The deferral of this change to 2027 gives current visa holders an additional year to prepare.

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